



Sexual harassment among educators and learners in rural high schools in Morocco: A case story

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Abstract— Sexual harassment remains a pressing issue in sensitive realms such as educational settings, with high schools being particularly vulnerable environments. This case study delves into the disturbing reality of sexual harassment among educators and learners alike in a specific high school that is situated in the suburbs of the historical town of Meknes, Morocco. In order to shed light on the detrimental consequences of this critical issue for all stakeholders involved, the study employs a qualitative research design; data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis to explore the experiences of the parties involved. The aim behind this study is to reveal the intrinsic causes and side effects that lead some educators to molest some of their students inside the “sacred realm” of school. Moreover, the case story highlights the lasting impact of sexual harassment on victims' mental health and academic performance, as well as the broader repercussions on the school community. Before emphasizing the need for policies and training in high schools to combat this pervasive issue and promote inclusive learning environment, wherein educators and learners can thrive without fear of harassment and to nurture a culture of respect, equity, and dignity for all. The findings unveil a number of themes for analysis and the generation of final results.

Keywords— sexual harassment, high school, molestation, educators, learning environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

High schools are meant to be safe and “sacred” settings devoted for learning and personal growth, where educators play a pivotal role in shaping the minds and futures of young learners. It is the place where the process of students' socialization takes place to trigger the acquisition of attitudes, behaviours, values as well as the accredited standards that are axiomatically instilled and profoundly dug in the most “should be” healthy and tidied up environments - school-, in order to guarantee the assertion of those values for the long term. However, beneath the veneer of academic excellence, sexual harassment as a deep insidious problem pervades educational institutions, leaving no one entirely immune. While efforts are aimed at the entire school community at the primary level, secondary school efforts target a smaller group of students who are most at-risk for developing academic or emotional problems or may suffer from deleterious effects caused by sexual harassment (Merrell et al., 2006). By and large, any

adult molestation or sexual abuse in schools is of grave concern as it holds the attention of students, parents, educators, and the environment of education.

1.1. Research Hypothesis

The thematic analysis of this study is based on the related framed hypothesis that reads as follows: “Given the sanctity of the research site, investigating factors contributing to the perpetuation of sexual harassment in high schools among students and teachers is due”.

1.2. Research Questions

A number of research questions were generated to support the hypothesis. By addressing this set of questions, the study aims to gain deep insights into the dynamics, contributing factors, and consequences of the molestations of educators towards learners, which emphasises the need to approach this topic with the utmost sensitivity and empathy, keeping the well-being of all individuals involved at the forefront of the research endeavour. Such understanding can serve as a

basis for developing effective prevention and intervention measures to create a safer and more respectful educational atmosphere for all students and educators.

RQ1: What are the specific forms of sexual harassment reported by students and teachers within the high school environment?

RQ2: What role does the organizational culture of the high school play in either tolerating or preventing sexual harassment incidents?

RQ3: What are the barriers that hinder victims from reporting incidents of sexual harassment, and how can these barriers be addressed?

RQ4: How do teachers and school authorities respond to reported cases of sexual harassment, and what improvements can be made to ensure a more supportive and effective response?

RQ5: What are the long-term consequences of sexual harassment on the mental health, well-being, and academic performance of the victims in the high school environment?

RQ6: How do students perceive the role of teachers in contributing to or mitigating instances of sexual harassment in the high school?

1.3. Methods of Research: Descriptive Case Study

In order to achieve the desirable results, the research design employed for this study is a descriptive case study approach, aiming at providing a detailed and in-depth analysis of the particular case at hand to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Observation was used and an open-ended interview was conducted with the targeted molested student in order to uncover the main themes or phenomena that lead to the occurring of such behaviours.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While browsing a number of resources about this issue, to my surprise, I realized that it is no longer a current subject that was facilitated by the emergence of the technological innovations that students are obsessed with. Sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means affected nearly one-third (30 per cent) of students. Interestingly, many of the students who were sexually harassed through cyberspace were also sexually harassed in person; the proliferation of text messages and internet connection which facilitates this process today. Sexual abuse at educational settings especially among teachers towards learners is rather an older phenomenon that was marked in a number of schools in USA and Europe and that many scholars have already coped with (Dwarking, 2000).

2.1 Defining the concepts

2.1.1 What is sexual harassment?

Rampant old definitions and recent ones exist regarding sexual harassment in educational institutions. Researchers have tackled the issue from endless angles to distinguish between various forms of sexual harassment that range from non-verbal through verbal to physical actions. The behaviour may also include, but is not limited to, explicit or implicit sexual comments, jokes, or innuendos, unwanted touching, leering, stalking, sexual propositions, or the display of sexually explicit images or materials without consent. It can have severe psychological, emotional, and professional consequences for the victim, affecting their self-esteem, well-being, and performance. In this vein Clark (1979) noted:

Sexual harassment in the classroom... is harassment in which the faculty member covertly or overtly uses the power inherent in the status of a professor to threaten, coerce or intimidate a student to accept sexual advances or risk reprisal in terms of a grade, a recommendation, or even a job.

In the same year, MacKinnon (1979) advanced in more general terms that sexual harassment refers to “the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power. Central to the concept is using power derived from one social sphere to lever benefits or to impose deprivations in another.” Both scholars agree on the fatality of the issue and alarm the readers about the short and long-term consequences. The assumption that a teacher, the case of this study, would engage in such inappropriate behaviour is not supported by research or evidence. Moreover, what is essential in defining sexual molestation is the imbalance of power in gendered relations that is at the core of sexual harassment (Leach and Humphreys, 2007)

Following a similar vein, Lipson (2001) acknowledged that eight out of 10 students undergo some form of sexual harassment during their school processes. Studies have shown that sexual harassment negatively affects students' emotional and educational sides. Among all the students who experience sexual harassment (47%) feel upset and worried right afterward. When (40%) of the students who experience sexual harassment are more likely to react by avoiding the person who molested or harassed them, (24%) are talking less in class, not wanting to go to school, (22%) tend to change their seats in class to get farther away from someone and (21%) make a request to the administration to change the class and (20%) finding it hard to pay attention in school (Leach, 2007).

2.1.2 The gendered view of sexual harassment in high schools

However, power relations and gender roles that reflect the patriarchal system of the society is exemplified in many African schools where authoritarian school systems are established (Leach, 2007). In our Moroccan public high schools, power differences and power relations based on gender are prevalent between teachers and students and among students as well. Girls can suffer from sexual harassment by both teachers and peers. Moreover, in socially conservative societies, female students are placed under spot in case of abusive practices, which is not the case with teachers who are not questioned, even if they exhibit similar abusive behaviour.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 A Descriptive Case Study

Creswell (2014, p. 241) makes a lucid and comprehensive definition of case study strategy that goes in line with the objectives of the study at hand.

Case Studies are a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time.

The attributes of descriptive case study strategy that Creswell advocated are pivotal for this study. First, the researcher wants to describe specific behaviour occurring in a particular environment. The phenomenon is studied in details within the natural context of the targeted high school. The contextual nature of the case study is defined by Yin (1993) as an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and addresses a situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.”

The objective behind using a descriptive case study in this work is that it is, on the one hand, a single case study; the only grievance on the part of a teacher towards a student that was publically raised to the administration. On the other hand, it has the purpose of restricting the scope of the study looking up for solutions. There are two methods of research used in this study, observation and interviewing the victim. It is worthy of mention that I must emphasize the need to approach this topic with the utmost sensitivity and empathy, keeping the well-being of all individuals involved at the forefront of the endeavour of this research.

3.2 The contextual background of the case study

Little research has been conducted about this issue due to the sensitivity of the topic on the one hand, and to the specificity of the place on the other. This study comes to unveil some of the societal structures that prevent this issue from seeing light especially in this specific setting. The study is conducted in a senior high school that is located in a small village called Moulay Idriss Zerhoun, a town in the region of Fès-Meknès of northern Morocco, spread over two hills at the base of Mount Zerhoun. It is famous for being the site of the tomb of Idriss I, the first major Islamic ruler of Morocco, after whom the town is named (Mohammed, 2010). This area attracts countless tourists every day, who visit the touristic town left by the Romans “Volubilis”.

As will be mentioned in the epitome, the importance of this school for the targeted student and her peers and for the residents of the whole village is very profound. School, according to this case study, represents a refuge for parents and a safe place to send their children to, especially girls. It is the only high school in the village and is characterized by its competent teaching and administrative staff. Strong relationships are built among students due to the nature of the village; some of them can share the same classroom from primary school to senior high school. On the other hand, female students, who are hard-workers, usually outnumber male students in classes. The majority of teachers are commuting, only few of them live in the city. The targeted teacher is one of those who live in the city.

3.3 Personal backgrounds of the participants

The prevalence, frequency, and impacts of sexual harassment in middle and high schools are the subject of this study. The aim is to concentrate on all facets of the targeted person's and his victim's backgrounds, including substance abuse, high-risk sexual behaviours, esteem building, career planning, academic performance, and relationship building, in response to worries about the increased risk of school dropout and emotional problems for sexually molested students. The primary concern of this study stems from my specific experiences I used to have as a female educator in the educational institution in which the study is conducted. My constant presence there as a teacher is what led me undertake a deep investigation about the permeated causes and factors that lead repeated misconducts of an educator at several students, the majority of whom are in his class and the overwhelming majority of whom attend the evening classes he organizes every day. The students turn to his evening classes as a means of reinforcing their knowledge of French. For this person, evening classes are the ideal setting in which to pick his victims.

It is noteworthy that the people who live in this area are physically appealing; they have a special charm. They must, however, work in order to survive and feel socially equal to their peers because they are sufficiently poor. One observed notion about the students of that place is the fact that the vast majority of them are preoccupied with their physical appearance, so their poor living conditions aren't entirely reflected in the way they dress and apply makeup. Some of our students, particularly girls, dress with overtly sexual overtones, despite the specificity of the place, while other students have nothing to wear. Accordingly, social classes are not set clearer given the appearance of students at schools that is at odd with their reality.

As far as the second participant of this study is concerned, he is one of the highly experienced teachers at this school, the targeted person is married with two young children (ages 3 and 1), and his wife is a relative. Evidently, he follows his religious beliefs to the letter because he frequents the mosque during the day and at 'Alfajr' prayer. He is a capable teacher who is always on time. He contributes to a number of charities and is expected to give free lessons to underprivileged students. However, when he gets angry, he becomes violent and has a tendency to use derogatory language and morally reprehensible expressions to speak to both male and female students. He was referred to as "the real tongue-lashing" person by our former principal. All of these characteristics occasionally create turmoil about his inappropriate behaviour with female students as well as female colleagues who are not yet engaged. The student is a recent divorcee, and this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. In order to finish her studies, she has defied her social and psychological circumstances.

3.4 The case story

To my surprise, the student did not object to voice her thoughts about the molestation she had endured. Here is how her tale begins:

After the trial I went through with my ex-husband, with whom I led a wrong life in every way, I started school this year. The wrong life I was living was sometimes shown through adultery, other times through physical and emotional abuse, and primarily through beatings that left permanent scars on my body and would inevitably serve as a constant reminder of everything bad I have experienced.

The first time I attended class, I was anxiously awaiting the arrival of the French teacher? Who was up to that time unknown to students. As soon as he entered the room,

a horrible feeling overcame me simply because I know him. In my innermost, I didn't want him to be my teacher, but I don't have the right to object as I cannot change the class. I told myself, "I need to be cautious around this person."

Thereafter, he requested my phone number claiming that we could communicate in French in order to improve my level in the language that was frightening the majority of students in Zerhoun.

After a few days, his messages took on a new resonance and included phrases like "I miss you," "I can't stop thinking of you," "I like your eyes," and so on. I considered several times how to get rid of this "dirt," I felt incredibly intimidated and unable to sleep for days, and I lost my appetite. I did not, however, accept being treated in this manner; I felt humiliated, and I permanently left my seat in his evening classes.

I told myself, "I need to be guile and careful with this person at the same time." In order to avoid confronting him, I chose to arrive early for class and leave first. I avoided speaking in class and preferred reading my manual or my novel while pretending to take notes, to avoid any contact of him. To be honest, I made no effort to follow up his lectures. I started hating this school subject, despite its importance in the first baccalaureate and I was thinking of leaving school for good because my family cannot send me to complete my studies in the town especially that I was a divorcee.

It was not only this person at school who was molesting his female students, there were two or more others, but they were acting secretly and intelligently. Teachers were quite aware that their molested students are not courageous enough to voice their suffering to their parents or to the administration, although there are others who believed that to be in personal contact with a teacher is a privilege for her, because they thought the relationship would end up in marriage.

When he ventured to ask me for a date outside my area, I felt outraged and humiliated and decided not to be passive. Getting a good mark in French was alluring for many students but not for me. I recorded

the situation and sought protection from the director. I could no longer give in to his demands.

It was too late when he decided to take my phone to delete the recorded audio from it when he was surrounded by danger, he continued to threaten me several times in addition to his offensive terms and expressions and bad behaviours but he succumbed to the reality that he will be punished in a way or in another. The director felt embarrassed chiefly when I asked his full protection. Unfortunately, the problem was raised to the directorate. The fact that the responsible called up the president of “the Association of the parents and Pupils”, the human rights associations and the responsible about the region, has really soothed my nerves. I felt that there are really people who care for my cause, which is the cause of a number of students who secretly suffer from the tyranny of this person and his immoral deeds.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDING RESULTS

The story of the bullied student and her epitome revealed a number of themes and phenomena. Preliminary findings reveal a distressing prevalence of sexual harassment incidents from educators towards female learners being disproportionately affected. Moreover, the study identifies power imbalances from the part of dictatorial teachers, gender stereotypes, and the normalization of certain behaviours as contributing factors to the perpetuation of sexual harassment in high schools more particularly in this region.

Results show that poverty is a factor of importance to emerge from the story; it is downright cruel to take advantage of the plights and hardships of needy students and abuse their bodies and reputations. As for the sample, she had trouble sleeping and lost her appetite in addition to the feeling of embarrassment that preoccupied her for a prolonged period of time. It is true that those who are subjected to sexual harassment by teachers suffer negative health effects as a result of the abuse. Moreover, based on personal observations and different stories from students, teachers and administrators, despite the specificity of the place, sexual harassment is only one reason behind students committing suicide at the period from 2011 and 2015, among many, getting low grades was a factor as the parents attributed it to laziness or having bad relationships with peers.

Another theme of consequence that the narrative suggested refers to the serious psychological and mental effects that the bad behaviours of the teacher towards the student caused, which made her feel less self-assured and created turmoil due to intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and emotional triggers associated with the trauma. This can lead to a decrease in attention span and overall cognitive functioning. The victim also admitted to feeling scared or afraid and confused about her identity and the norms she had picked up at home and felt that the school, which is a second institution after home from which young people acquire more principles and qualities by which they can face the outer world, has lost its credibility. The emotional toll of sexual abuse can result in decreased motivation to excel academically.

A fourth emergent theme concerns the effects of sexual abuse on the students' academic performance that were detrimental, profound and far-reaching. The trauma and emotional distress resulting from sexual abuse have significantly impacted various aspects of the student's educational experience and achievement. A decline in the academic performance is mainly due to absenteeism and school avoidance, which are a fifth theme the narrative displays. According to the story, some students who have experienced sexual abuse may avoid attending school altogether due to the fear of encountering triggers or reminders of the dramatic experience. This absenteeism can lead to a decline in academic performance and engagement. The affected student left the evening classes that the teacher had scheduled and avoided the teacher. She didn't go to school and she didn't speak in class. She struggled to concentrate, skipped classes, and found it challenging to study.

The lack of credibility previously mentioned by the student is another key emergent theme. The trauma of sexual abuse can strain relationships with teachers, classmates, and family members. Students may struggle to trust authority figures and peers, further isolating them from the support systems that are crucial for academic success.

V. CONCLUSION

In environments that are safe and encouraging as school, all students can access quality education and the legal obligation to succeed academically and socially. Many students are more likely to experience a variety of emotional and behavioural issues, such as depression, suicide, truancy, dropping out of school and academic failure, while many other students have the chance of not experiencing the deleterious effects of harassment and bullying. (Crothers, 2007; Espelage et al., 2008; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Savin-Williams, 1994). Thus, understanding the prevalence

of different types of sexual harassment is essential for crafting efforts to respond to and prevent it. Yet, sexual harassment is also defined by targeted students' reactions and their short- and long- term effects. The responsibility of school administrators to foster resiliency falls on the victims themselves who should be courageous enough to unmask the bad conducts they experience every day. A school with a grievance procedure is liable for any conduct of its students that creates a sexually hostile environment where the school knows (or should have known) of the harassment and the school fails to take immediate and appropriate steps to remedy it.

Implications and recommendation

School administrators, school principals and school educational staff are responsible for the detrimental effects left by sexual harassment inside schools. Thus, Educational institutions should implement trauma-informed approaches to teaching and support. This involves training educators and staff to understand the impact of trauma on students' academic performance and behaviour, as well as providing appropriate interventions and accommodations. Second, teachers should receive training in recognizing signs of trauma and responding appropriately. Moreover, schools should collaborate with community organizations, mental health professionals, and support groups to provide holistic support to students who have experienced sexual abuse. More importantly, a parental involvement is vital; families are aware of available resources and understand how to support their child's recovery and academic progress. Finally, Policymakers should work to implement comprehensive policies that address sexual abuse prevention, reporting, and support within educational settings. These policies should be informed by research and best practices in trauma-informed care cause the psychological health of our students is much more important than the knowledge they might obtain at schools.

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